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Debased: Hemingway's Not-So-Destructive Portrayal of Alcoholism in *The Sun Also Rises*

Writing in 1923, the Reverend Floyd W. Tomkins stated, "Even the most extreme anti-prohibitionist does not want the saloon brought back... Because he recognizes the menace of intoxicating drink to the peace and safety of a community" (15). No doubt he would've found the amount of alcohol consumption in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* appalling, had he ever read it. Matts Djos echoes Tomkins' condemnation of alcohol dependency in his assessment of Hemingway's book, "It is a novel about spiritual bankruptcy, codependence, and people who withdraw and become emotionally impotent... It is a portrait of what can happen when emotionally damaged people seek refuge from themselves in the desensitizing and addictive effects of liquor" (76). While I do not disagree with Djos' analysis, or with the idea that most if not all of the main characters in the story are alcoholics, I think it's important to recognize Hemingway's own intentions with the novel, and his opinions on drink. I will first demonstrate how closely interwoven the prohibition movement was with nativist (and by extension, racist and xenophobic) policies, then elaborate on how Hemingway depicts alcoholic consumption as not only a method for expatriates like Jacob Barnes to retaliate against the insular-minded administration of 1920's America, but a way to build communities and relationships between individuals.

While Tomkins and his fellow prohibitionists might've claimed the obvious "moral and religious" (15) grounds as reason enough to abolish the sale and purchase of alcohol in the U.S., modern perspectives have illuminated their motivations as less-than righteous. Jeffrey Schwarz writes, "Prohibition groups such as the Anti-Saloon League sought to create a new 'Americanism' that favored the white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class and excluded what they considered the unsavory immigrant element in their society" (180-181). Why exactly did the prohibitionists view immigrants as "unsavory?" It had a lot to do with the growing immigrant populations in cities like New York, "[Many Americans] viewed these urban centers as a threat to their rural and conservative way of life, for they believed that the mixing of various ethnic and racial groups would taint America's purity" (Schwarz 182). It also did not go unobserved, that these urban areas were where prohibition was most commonly ignored (qtd. in Schwarz 182). As a result, "These nationalists began to blame urban immigrants, in particular, for this violation of the prohibition law" (Schwarz 182). The fear of foreign influence, miscegenation and other absurdities, however, were popular outside the prohibition lobbyists too, as Mae Ngai reports:

During and immediately after World War 1, a confluence of political and economic trends impelled the legislation of immigration restriction. Wartime nationalism had produced a feverish sentiment against presumably disloyal 'hyphenated Americans.'

While war nationalism was aimed primarily at German Americans, it provided a popular basis of support for nativists that had been campaigning for [immigration] restriction since the 1890s. The Red Scare of 1919-1920, which equated foreigners with radicalism, gave yet additional support to immigration restriction. Significantly, business interests were less invested in immigrant labor after the war... By 1920, industrial capitalism had

matured to the point where economic growth could come more from technological advances in mass production than from enlarging the workforce. (11-12)

A turning point (wherein public opinion reflected national policy) appears to have occurred in 1924 with the passing of The Johnson-Reed Act. The law set a fixed annual quota for the number of immigrants allowed into the U.S., “[Approximately] 155,000 admissions per year (compared to an average of one million a year before the war)” (Ngai 12). Additionally, the law appeared to be a blatant attempt at, “The use of state coercion to achieve a racial vision of the nation. The ‘national origins’ quota had a double effect, both ranking European countries in a hierarchy of desirability and creating a common ‘white’ race set apart from non-whites, such as Asians, for whom an entirely different racial policy (exclusion) applied” (Ngai 15). Under The Johnson-Reed Act, quotas were established in a hierarchy based on racial attractiveness, with those of Western European descent given the most available slots due to their “whiteness.” Asian and other Eastern immigrants were largely excluded, for no other reason than the inaccurate perception that they were of poor stock.

Although prohibition appeared to have succeeded in 1918 with the passing of the 18th amendment, the reality was that it proved incredibly difficult to enforce. A political cartoon from 1926 entitled “Bullet-Proof” illustrates the point succinctly. It depicts a small officer firing his pistol at an imposing giant made of money. The money is variously named “money to hire ‘best’ lawyers,” and “money to bribe politicians.” The giant carries a large axe upon which the words “Gang Rule” can be seen and he appears largely unconcerned with the officer. Bootlegging proved too profitable, and alcohol too popular, for either to be effectively controlled. Recognizing the impotency of the Volstead Act (the law enforcing the 18th amendment), many prohibitionists like those belonging to the “Anti-Saloon League often supported the same

political agendas as the Ku Klux Klan, and due to the prohibitionist stronghold in the southern and mid-western United States, the two groups often became conflated” (Schwarz 186). This shouldn’t come as surprising, considering it’s not as if the two groups were entirely different to begin with. Both prohibitionists and Klansmen subscribed to similar ideologies that placed importance on America’s native-born, white Protestants. Both also had a key interest, because of their xenophobia, in the sanctioning of immigration. The prohibitionists also recognized in the Klan, a powerful ability to intimidate in a way the federal government was incapable of, “Where the Volstead Act and prohibition groups failed, the Klan often succeeded in enforcing prohibition through their own vigilante actions” (qtd. in Schwarz 186).

Hemingway clearly does not agree with the prohibitionist and nativist opinions of his contemporaries. He was himself an expatriate living in Paris when *The Sun Also Rises* was written, and he filled his novel with enough scenes of drunken debauchery to, as Bill would say, “Make a man join the Klan” (Hemingway 93). Djos writes that Jake Barnes’ drinking in the novel rooted in “escapism” (10), and that alcoholism is the ultimate cause for the falling out between Michael, Cohn, Jake and Brett at the end of the novel. Djos states, “Drinking isolates the characters and fragments their relationships, culminating in rebellion, anti-social behavior, and an addiction to social fakery and make-believe” (69). But is the alcohol actually to blame? The core conflict of this novel appears to be four men (Jake, Michael, Cohn, and – to a lesser extent – Romero) fighting for the affections of one woman, Brett. There are plenty of moments in the book where a character engages another in a substantial emotional connection after becoming inebriated, such as Brett telling Jake “Oh, darling, I’ve been so miserable” (32) after a night of drinking with a party of homosexuals. The ensuing conversation is one of the few moments in the novel (thanks to Brett’s state and the privacy of the cab) where Brett and Jake

share their personal grievances together. In regards to Jake, Schwarz felt drinking revealed “Not only his desire to escape from the effects of war through alcohol, but also a desire to escape from the effects of American prohibition and its ideologies” (188). Schwarz lends veracity to this interpretation by quoting Hemingway himself, “I like to see every man drunk. A man does not exist until he is drunk” (qtd. in Schwarz 196), and then concluding “Drinking in the novel actualizes Hemingway’s own views of drinking, and signifies both a communal enjoyment of life and its pleasures, and a manner of rebelling against prohibition and its nationalist agendas” (196). There is plenty of evidence to support the idea that Hemingway viewed drinking as a method of bonding. After a night of drinking and revelry with the Count, Brett tells Barnes, “He’s quite one of us... I rather liked [him]” (40), all while accepting more liquor from Jake. The phrase, “Come and have a drink,” is used, in various permutations all throughout the book, so commonly that it takes on the same triviality of a handshake. Drinking becomes an opening or greeting, a recognition from one individual to another that they consider themselves equals. Schwarz details one of the most obvious depictions of alcohol’s communal nature, “During the festival, a group of dancers wearing these blue smocks parade down the street carrying a large banner on which is painted the words, ‘Hurray for Wine! Hurray for the foreigners’ (p. 158)” (196-197). The contrast between the Pamplona reception and the prohibitionist ideologies could not be more extreme (Schwarz 199). Whereas the United States sought to actively shut out alcohol and especially “foreigners”, Hemingway describes the people of Pamplona’s reaction to Jake’s crew of “foreigners” with nothing short of elation.

Hemingway was certainly not alone in his belief of alcohol as important to communal fellowship, either. Wasserman notes, “Both [Irish and German] ethnic groups, as well as other ethnic communities (e.g., Italians) used alcohol as a means of achieving group social solidarity”

(890). Many of the cultures persecuted by the nationalist movement had strong cultural traditions that utilized alcohol, such as the Jewish people, which attracted the ire of prohibitionists as well. In this bizarre cultural landscape the intolerance for alcohol comes to represent an intolerance for any idea, belief, or practice that does not conform to that of the white, middle-class Protestants who spearheaded the nationalist movement. The “rampant alcoholism” as some may call it, becomes not just an act of rebellion but a demarcation between the close-minded puritans in America, and the intellectual expatriates gathering in Europe.

It is of no real debate that Jacob and his friends Brett, Bill, Michael, and even Cohn are all alcoholics who grossly overindulge themselves over the course of *The Sun Also Rises*. What is worth debating, however, is how Hemingway intended for their excess drinking to be interpreted. Drinking exists as a political rebuttal against the isolationist policies of an America gripped by xenophobia and puritanical mores; as a celebration of the inane, and self-indulgence of drunken revelry; and as a means of establishing unity and community between people. Hemingway felt a man had not lived until he'd been drunk. The characters of his novel would certainly agree.